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ABSTRACT

This report describes findings of two half-day focus group meetings that discussed experiences and concerns about the participation of students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) in Minnesota's Basic Standards Exams. The focus groups included test coordinators, general classroom teachers, and English as a Second Language teachers. The report summarizes the discussions held during the focus groups, including: (1) experiences during the Spring 1996 testing, with information on the level of participation by students with LEP, how participation decisions were made, and provision of accommodations; (2) suggestions for future test administrations, including information on interim testing, possible accommodations, district decision making processes, temporary exemptions, and a Pass-LEP scoring option; (3) future district needs, including the need for better student information, better test information, and other types of tests; and (4) district concerns, including general concerns about setting levels of performance, remediation and test preparation, and use of data. Possible accommodations discussed included the option to restate directions and test questions in different English words to make the test more comprehensible to students with LEP, the option to test students with LEP in their own classrooms, and the option to use dictionaries on the Basic Standards of Written Composition. (CR)

ED 415 639

Assessment Series
Minnesota Report 4

Focus Group Input on Students with Limited English Proficiency and Minnesota's Basic Standards Tests

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STATE ASSESSMENT SERIES
Minnesota Report 4

Focus Group Input on Students with Limited English Proficiency and Minnesota's Basic Standards Tests

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The Minnesota Assessment Project is a four-year, federally funded effort awarded to the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The project's goal is to promote and evaluate the participation of students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities in Minnesota's Graduation Standards. Specifically, the project will examine ways in which students with limited English and students with disabilities can participate in the Basic Standards Tests of reading, mathematics, and written composition and in the performance-based assessments of the high standards in the Profile of Learning.

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Overview

Minnesota has joined numerous other states in the call for higher standards in elementary and secondary education. Following this national trend, it is developing assessment and accountability systems that will help ensure that Minnesota's students are reaching those standards.

In the spring of 1996, Minnesota students participated in the first administration of the Basic Standards Tests, one component of Minnesota's new educational assessment system. Although this administration of reading and mathematics exams (two of the three components of the Basic Standards Tests) was conducted on a voluntary basis, most school districts in Minnesota participated in the assessment.

Besides encouraging districts to participate in the 1996 testing cycle, the state of Minnesota also encouraged districts to include all students who would be eligible to participate. Surveys of some of the participating districts (see *Minnesota Report 2*) suggested that districts did, in fact, attempt to include students with limited English proficiency (LEP) in the assessments. Most districts indicated that more than 50% of their students with limited English proficiency participated in the assessment. Districts also indicated that they provided some assessment accommodations to students, even though in many cases, they did not yet have guidelines about the use of accommodations. Furthermore, districts indicated the need for several kinds of assistance from the state.

When the survey was developed, it was considered important to follow-up on the information obtained through it by inviting a group of individuals to participate in half-day focus groups to discuss experiences and concerns in greater depth. This report is a summary of the discussions held during the focus groups.

Procedures

Two half-day focus group meetings were held to follow-up on the Spring 1996 testing, with particular focus on students with limited English proficiency. Attending the first half-day meeting were the testing coordinator, a general classroom teacher, and an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher from each of three metropolitan area school districts. For the second half-day meeting, individuals holding similar positions in four greater Minnesota school districts attended. Participating in the focus group meetings were:

July 23rd Focus Group for Metropolitan Districts:
Anoka-Hennepin: Julie Bryant, Ruth Castle, and Gayle Walkowiak
Bloomington: Doris Frace and Bob Peterson
Minneapolis: Bev Lillquist, David Rathburn, Judy Strohl, and Soua Yang
St. Paul: James Evans, Zhining Qin, and Julieta Fajardo Wahlberg

July 24th Focus Group for Greater Minnesota Districts:
Minnesota River Valley Cooperative: Barb Bahson, Cindy Curtis, and Amber Volkman
Mountain Lake: Jim Brandt, Cynthia Celander, and Brenda Feil
St. Cloud: Judy Germundson, Tom Prescott, and Karmin Schraw
Willmar: Donna Cairns and Marv Lucas

These individuals participated in the focus group meetings with interest and concern about how students with limited English proficiency could best participate in Minnesota's educational reform efforts. The Project is indebted to them for their enthusiastic participation.

For both of the meetings, the discussion followed an agenda that outlined the questions to be covered. To summarize these discussions, this report has been organized into four general sections: (1) experiences

during the Spring 1996 testing, (2) suggestions for future test administrations, (3) future district needs, and (4) future concerns.

I. Experiences During Spring 1996 Testing

A. Levels of Participation by Students with Limited English Proficiency

Most participants said that their schools or districts tested the majority of LEP students in the spring testing cycle because they wanted to receive some basic data on how LEP students were doing. One metropolitan district tested all LEP students unless they had been in the U.S. less than three years. Another Metropolitan district tested all eighth graders, including LEP students. In a third metropolitan district, any LEP student who was willing to take the test was included. The majority of the districts representing greater Minnesota tested all of their students (except for one district that allowed LEP students to be exempt if they had been in the U.S. for under 3 years). In some of the greater Minnesota districts there were no eighth graders identified as LEP. In other districts, there were students who spoke English as a second language but were not categorized as LEP, because they were not being served in ESL classes at the time of the spring testing.

B. How Participation Decisions Were Made

In the greater Minnesota school districts represented at the meetings, decisions about testing were made by small groups of testing technicians and others working together. Because students often transfer back and forth between small school districts, some participants said that they felt the need to have some consistency between districts. Other school districts in greater Minnesota said that teachers serving as case managers for individual students had made decisions. One Metropolitan district allowed parents of LEP students to request an exemption for their child by putting the request in writing; they received very few requests. In

another Metropolitan district, if the student had been in the district a short amount of time, the student's ESL teacher made the decision about whether the student should participate.

Many participants said that while administrators understood ways to include LEP students in the spring testing cycle, the limited time that districts had to conduct testing made it difficult for other staff or faculty to be as well prepared. In general, several participants agreed that the time was too short to make adequate preparations. Participants from greater Minnesota said that teachers did not understand the process well enough and there was a lot of confusion.

Several participants suggested developing interim tests to be given at earlier grades.

C. Providing Accommodations

Most schools and districts represented at the meetings did not provide LEP students with accommodations during the Reading and Mathematics Standards Tests. A few did allow extra time for LEP students, and a separate room for testing.

II. Suggestions for Future Test Administrations

A. Interim Testing

Several participants suggested developing interim tests to be given at earlier grades. These tests could have easier items but be aimed at the same content standards. The tests could be administered to LEP students who are excused from Basic Standards testing through a temporary exemption. Interim testing is less frustrating for students because they know how far there is to go; it makes it clear what the student needs to do. Participants thought that such testing would also be useful for accountability purposes, since it can show progress over time. An interim test would show that instruction is doing something.

Participants suggested that funds be made available through the Project to provide translated practice tests and other practice materials to help

ESL teachers prepare LEP students for the Basic Standards Tests. The following issues were raised about practice materials:

- One participant expressed concern about the legal implications of having practice materials available in some languages but not in others. It was noted, however, that equity concerns were less for test preparation than for the testing itself.

- One metropolitan district is currently developing its own practice materials for the Basic Standards Tests. One participant said that it would be useful to have a central effort to collect and share practice materials among the districts. Other participants stated that they would appreciate practice materials made from released test items when those were available. They would also like sample writing prompts for the Basic Standards Test in written composition.

- Some participants believed that test preparation materials and sessions should be in English since students are expected to do the test in English to pass at the designated "Pass-State" level. Others wondered whether it would be possible to do test preparation in bilingual classrooms during regular class time.

- The use of regular dictionaries written in various first languages of LEP students was mentioned as a crucial need by several participants. Mathematics dictionaries were also cited as an important part of practice materials.

B. *Possible Accommodations Needed by Students with Limited English Proficiency*

When asked about possible accommodations that should be available for LEP students in future testing cycles, the following points were raised:

- Some participants thought that the option to restate directions and test questions in different words (but still in English) would be useful to help make the test more comprehensible to LEP students. One suggestion offered was to provide more than one set of test directions, with each set worded in a slightly different way. This way, if a student asked for clarification of a word or concept in the directions, test administrators could still be reading a uniform script, while the student would receive a paraphrase in words that he or she could understand. Several participants suggested that if they could receive test directions ahead of the test, ESL teachers could go over them with their students, and avoid the need for translating directions in many cases. A representative of the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning reported that non-secure testing materials can be sent out in advance.

- Some participants favored the use of audio tapes on which directions and questions would be heard orally. (Students in special education had this option in the Spring 1996 testing cycle.) It was thought that tapes would also be useful for LEP students, but some participants questioned whether enough tapes would be available for all the students who might need them.

- Regarding accommodations in setting or timing, one participant thought that ESL teachers should be allowed to test their own students in their own classrooms. However, another participant believed that

LEP students should be tested in the same setting as all other students, and should not be singled out for special treatment. While most participants thought that extended time is an important accommodation, it should be given in such a way that it does not draw attention to the LEP students who need it. If LEP students are escorted out of the common testing room to another room where they can finish the test, it will be obvious to everyone that they are "different."

While most participants thought that extended time is an important accommodation, it should be given in such a way that it does not draw attention to the LEP students who need it.

- Some participants favored the option to use dictionaries as a possible accommodation on the Basic Standards Test of Written Composition, and some did not. One participant commented that a dictionary could be helpful for some LEP students – that they should be given the option to use one if it meant passing the test earlier with the dictionary's help. Some participants felt that a dictionary would not help on the test of written composition, because students generally use the vocabulary that they know and are comfortable with. Participants from one metropolitan district said that their district has allowed LEP students to use a dictionary on writing tests in the past and that this has been useful.

- One participant said that in the case of mathematics, it would be helpful to restate the test directions and questions in the student's first language. Other participants felt that this wouldn't be an allowable accommodation.

C. District Decision Making Processes

Participants from greater Minnesota districts suggested that an "LEP team" make testing decisions for each LEP student in the same way that

IEP teams make decisions for students with disabilities. Other group members stressed the need for LEP students and parents to know what their options are so that they can make informed choices. These individuals suggested that decisions about exemption should involve the student, his or her parents, administrators, and teachers. While this group would make the decision, it could not be an excessively formal, complex, or costly process. It was suggested that a third-party, impartial advocate for the child might also be a member of this decision making team. Some participants mentioned that students might not want to be exempted even if they qualify – that they should be given the choice to participate. In the metropolitan districts, participants believed that it might not be possible to get the parents of each LEP student involved in decision making, so the schools or districts may have to set up a parent board to review exemptions.

One participant thought that the types of accommodations allowed should be left up to the individual teachers and their LEP students. These people know what would be most likely to work best in each case.

D. Temporary Exemptions for Students with Limited English Proficiency

The focus groups discussed the current temporary testing exemption for any LEP student who has had three or fewer years of instruction in a school where the primary instructional language is English. A common concern held by many of the participants was the impact that such an exemption might have on the provision of needed services to LEP students. Participants from greater Minnesota stated that in some small school districts with limited resources, services for LEP students will not be provided unless the state educational agency mandates such services. Group members considered restrictions on this exemption policy. For example, if an exemption was not allowed until the end of a student's senior year, the school district would be more motivated to provide services up to that point.

On a similar note, a proposed exemption of five years for the Basic Standards Test in Written Composition was not considered useful because it would make it even easier for districts to avoid serving LEP students. Participants thought that a three-year exemption on the writing test was the maximum that should be allowed. The general consensus was that, as early as possible, students should be required to take the tests in order to know how they match up to the standards. The participants thought it would be most beneficial to have a common exemption policy across all three Basic Standards Tests. They expressed that the most important thing is to help the students, and a five-year exemption will not do that in the long run.

The general consensus was that, as early as possible, students should be required to take the tests in order to know how they match up to the standards.

A proposal was made that LEP students be required to have their parents sign a formal exemption request form. This would add credibility to decisions and cause all parties to consider their decisions more carefully.

E. "Pass-LEP" and "Pass-Translate" Performance Levels

Overall, participants seemed to be undecided about a "Pass-LEP" scoring option for the Basic Standards writing test. They liked the idea in principle, but thought that "Pass-LEP" would be problematic and could have legal implications. The following points of view were expressed:

- Some participants suggested that different scoring for the "Pass-LEP" option would not be feasible due to the difficulty in allowing for the different types of errors that are made by each language group. How does one allow for errors that speakers of an African language might speak, as compared to speakers of Hmong? However, other participants pointed out that it is usually fairly clear whether a paper is written by a non-native speaker of English because there are some standard types of errors that native speakers of English do not commonly make. For example, allowance could be made for a lack of plural endings (-s, -es) on words, since this is a common second language acquisition problem for people from

many different first languages. Native speakers of English do not usually have a problem with plural word endings.

- One metropolitan district representative suggested that LEP students might need the "Pass-LEP" option, based on the member's prior experience with district writing tests. LEP students in the district were "punished" by scorers for their lack of proficiency in English (i.e., certain grammatical structures that are slow to develop because of interference from the student's first language). Another metropolitan district representative thought that it might be good to have marginal LEP student writing rescored by a trained group of ESL teachers who are familiar with typical second language acquisition problems. Other participants agreed with this suggestion.

Many participants thought that if there is a "Pass-LEP" option, it should be reserved as a last resort.

- Since the option is not given for the Basic Standards Test in reading, some participants thought that all three exams (reading, mathematics, and written composition) should be treated the same – that no special performance standards for LEP students should be allowed.

- Many participants thought that if there is a "Pass-LEP" option, it should be reserved as a last resort, perhaps in the spring of the senior year, for LEP students who are unable to pass at the "State" level. Similar beliefs were expressed toward the "Pass-Translation" option, which is to be provided for LEP students needing translated versions of the Basic Standards Test in mathematics. Participants thought that this designation might also be problematic, and raise certain legal issues if it were used.

III. Future District Needs

A. Better Student Information

Participants expressed a desire to code certain types of student information directly on test answer forms to use when later examining the participation of LEP students in the Basic Standards Tests. Currently, some districts are forced to review test records manually to find this information, a costly and time consuming process. When asked what information they would like to see on an answer sheet, participants suggested the following:

- Some participants wanted to see information about the student's first/home language entered on the answer sheet, instead of relying on the test administrators to identify students who "appear to be" LEP. There was some concern that test administrators who are not familiar with LEP students may identify LEP on the basis of appearance (e.g., identifying a Korean adoptee as LEP because the student is Asian). It was noted that home language information can be obtained through the student's Minnesota Advanced Reporting Student System (MARSS) tracking number, although some participants expressed concern over the efficiency of the MARSS system. It was also suggested that ESL teachers could be asked to complete the student information section, and state whether or not a student is receiving LEP services. Some participants from the metropolitan districts said that ESL teachers might not be willing to give this information.

- Other participants suggested collecting data from LEP students on their length of residence in the district. There was disagreement on the issue of whether these data should be collected from all students. Some participants thought that if all students are asked about their length of residence, the information would not be

as useful. Others thought that it would be useful to have this information on all students, as a possible explanatory factor for schools or districts showing low performance on the tests.

- The National Assessment of Educational Progress ("The Nation's Report Card") test was cited as an example of an assessment that has an excellent student data sheet accompanying it. Members suggested referring to this for further guidance in collecting student information.

B. Better Information About the Tests

Participants from greater Minnesota expressed the need for their ESL teachers to know more about the testing program in order to effectively communicate information to the parents of their LEP students. They suggested that the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning (CFL) produce a reference paper or brochure with questions that regular classroom teachers commonly ask about the testing, along with the answers to those questions. In one greater Minnesota district, special education teachers made such a brochure for regular classroom teachers, and it was successful. A brochure relating to LEP issues in testing would be helpful so all teachers have the same information. Participants thought it would be especially important to clarify the terms "accommodation" and "modification" in this brochure, and to articulate clear policies on temporary testing exemptions, so that the same situations are interpreted in the same way by all staff.

A similar suggestion was made for the CFL to develop a brochure for parents and to translate this document into the languages that are most dominant in the state. While it was recognized that a videotape would be ideal (since not all parents of LEP students can read in their native language) a brochure would certainly be helpful.

Several group members thought the Department needed to publish a list of acceptable accommodations for LEP students so that teachers know

what is allowable under the current guidelines. Others expressed a desire for the CFL to print a list of what types of skills will be assessed, and what content students are required to know. It was thought that students and parents have a right to know this and the information should be given clearly and concisely. These individuals believed that the expectations for the Basic Standards Test in mathematics were fairly clear, but not so clear in the reading assessment.

C. Other Expressed Needs

Districts need help on types of remediation to offer LEP students who do not pass the tests.

- Several participants expressed a desire for some kind of testing for LEP students who do not pass or are exempted from Basic Standards testing. A low score on a language proficiency test would document why a student is being exempted from the tests, and would give students an idea of where they are in their language acquisition.

- Districts need help on types of remediation to offer LEP students who do not pass the tests. For example, participants in both sessions did not feel particularly well prepared to deal with students who need remedial reading instruction. Junior high and high school teachers are not commonly trained in direct reading instruction.

- Participants asked for intermediate tests to be developed for elementary school as a step in preparing students for the Basic Standards Tests. They expressed the need for some kind of testing continuum, to show students exactly what they need to accomplish, and help them work their way up to the necessary level of achievement. Reference was made to other states such as Oregon and New York, which are currently using these types of intermediate tests.

- A concern was raised that few measures currently exist

that clearly define levels of language proficiency, especially in reading. Group members asked whether the Department could assist in identifying such instruments for local districts to use. Others questioned whether performance on norm-referenced tests could be used to determine adequate progress toward student readiness for the Basic Standards Tests.

- Representatives from districts in greater Minnesota asked that the CFL or the University of Minnesota provide additional training opportunities for teachers and administrators in knowing how to prepare LEP students for the Basic Standards Tests, and in making participation decisions.

Some participants expressed concern over the process of "putting children into small boxes" with all the different levels of passing.

IV. District Concerns

A. Setting Levels of Performance

Some participants expressed concern over the process of "putting children into small boxes" with all the different levels of passing. They found the different levels confusing and thought that it could be harmful to students to have varying standards. For example, participants cautioned that the effect of "Exempt" on a student's transcript could be detrimental when that student later applies for employment. If high school diplomas are to mean something, it was believed that exemption should be very limited.

One participant believed strongly that LEP students should be given the responsibility of learning the skills that are needed to pass the test. This group member thought that students should have opportunities to practice, but they should not be given special treatment because they will not receive special treatment from employers. Another participant added that singling out LEP students for special treatment in testing situations may violate some cultural ideas about the value of fitting in. If LEP

students are singled out, some of the students may "lose face" with family or peers.

Many participants worried about whether their LEP students would be able to pass the tests and graduate if the tests are only provided in English. They thought that assessment could be helpful if it is framed well, but a system that only has pass or fail options turns assessment into punishment.

B. Basic Standards Tests of Reading and Mathematics

Many participants said that the Basic Standards Test in Reading assesses different types of reading skills than they have been teaching. Teachers of elementary and junior high often teach reading for pleasure. The reading test assesses reading for information, an activity many students do not necessarily enjoy, or do extensively in school. One participant expressed her wish that the reading selections be geared toward a secondary student interest level.

If the state passes on the responsibilities of making written translations of tests (for the "Pass-Translation" option on the mathematics test) to the individual districts, districts may have difficulty making those translated versions available to all language groups within a district. There is a lack of money available for having translations made and a lack of available translators. There is a great deal of concern about the legal problems that could arise from a situation in which a translated test is not available for a student from a particular language group. Participants requested help from the CFL and the University of Minnesota in dealing with this translation issue.

Participants questioned the delay of the written composition exam until tenth grade. Some members believed that giving the writing test earlier would allow more time for remedial efforts aimed at those students who did not pass during their initial attempt.

C. Remediation and Test Preparation

Participants from smaller districts raised concern over remediation, fearing that regular classroom teachers will be required to simultaneously provide instruction in the regular curriculum and remediation for students who did not pass the test. Questions were raised as to how teachers will deal with students who fail the reading test when they are not necessarily trained in direct reading instructional techniques. Participants from greater Minnesota stated that they do not have the staffing and resources to provide remediation for LEP students who fail the exams.

Many participants expressed concern that too much instructional time may be given to preparing for the test.

Many participants expressed concern that too much instructional time may be given to preparing for the test, with too much emphasis on using old test forms and practice questions. Instead, they believed that students should have to come in before or after school to attend test preparation sessions.

D. Use of Data

Metropolitan area participants questioned how the performance data on LEP students would be used once it was available. They stated their desire to encourage all of their students to take the Basic Standards Tests and to work for a diploma at the state level, but they were concerned that the participation of these students may make a district's overall scores lower. These participants worried that test results could be used in harmful ways by the media and others, and that such misuse could have a negative impact on their ability to serve LEP students. Members believed strongly that the department and state need to clarify the reasons why they want the data; in short, is it for accountability or for school reform? A suggestion was made that the Project seriously consider ways to address the issues of public reporting, so that information can be shared with the public in an equitable manner, and that people are given an accurate picture of how well students are doing.

E. Other Expressed Concerns

Participants from greater Minnesota with significant minority student populations expressed concern about the LEP students who belong to the migrant worker population. These students may be present in school during the fall and spring, but absent during the winter. If the test is given in the winter, what effect will this have on the LEP students who do not take the test because they have temporarily moved away? Testing dates will have an impact on school district policies for graduation of these students. In addition, children of migrant workers do not always come to school with current transcripts to show how long they have been in school in various places. For this reason, it could be very difficult to decide whether they should be exempt from testing.

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